

***Detroit '67: A Scenic Design***

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

For thousands of years humans have struggled to survive and thrive within society. In environments where one can be limited by their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, this struggle is intensified ten-fold. Not only do individuals have to face prejudice in their everyday lives, but they must make the decision whether to stay safe by adhering to societal expectations or to take a risk and defy these expectations. Set against the backdrop of the 1967 Detroit race riots, Dominique Morisseau's *Detroit '67* focuses on an African American family that is not only struggling to survive, but to thrive. I created a scenic design that focuses on a realistic childhood home that acts as a safe haven but limits the characters' ability to grow and thrive.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Kerry Lee Chipman for advising me through this project. She has been an amazing mentor and continues to push me to be a better designer.

I would like to thank the director Andre Garner and the entire production team for their collaboration on this project. Their hard work and dedication elevated this production to new heights.

## Process Analysis Statement

The first step to any scenic design is to read to the script. In my process, I read the script at least three times before I even begin doing any research or sketching out rough ideas. The first read through is to enjoy the story as an audience member without paying any heed to specific analysis or the mechanical needs of the play. This gives me an idea of what the story is about and how an audience member could receive the story. On the second pass, I create a scenic breakdown: a list of all scene locations, notes on specific needs required of the set, and noting character entrances and exits onstage (see Appendix A). For *Detroit '67*, a major need of the play was to have two-stories that focused on a basement living space. On the third pass, I delve deeper into character analysis. I examine the core values and beliefs of the characters and try to find elements in the character's lives that could inform set dressings and props that are not specifically mentioned in the script. It is after this third pass that I then begin to analyze the theme of the play. This theme informs every design decision and is a critical component to effective story telling. For *Detroit '67* we see an African American family who is not only struggling to survive, but to thrive. Therefore, for my scenic design I wanted to focus on a childhood home that offers a safe haven to the characters yet is limiting in its ability to allow the characters to grow.

After analyzing the script, I move into my initial research phase. In this phase, I first began by examining four major categories: the Detroit 1967 race riots, events during the 1960s, Detroit residents and home interior, and Motown culture and music. To begin my search for information, I first examined newspaper articles to examine initial reactions to the riots. Through examining the *Billboard* newspaper, I was able to evaluate firsthand accounts of the riots to gain an understanding of the overall mood at the time to help incorporate into the set design. I also

watched new documentaries in relation to the Detroit race riots such as Fred Freed's "1967 NBC NEWS SPECIAL REPORT: 'SUMMER OF 67' (Aftermath Of Detroit Race Riots Of 1967)." This documentary provided some key context to the events surrounding the riots and provided interesting imagery to draw inspiration from.

In order to create a realistic house layout, I examined house blueprints from the Detroit Historical Museum and used Google Earth to examine houses on Clairmount street, the same street that the characters live on. For this portion of the research, I looked solely at homes that were built around the 1920s as the characters moved into their parents' house. Once I found enough research to reach reasonable conclusions on typical house layouts, I began to research interior elements that could be found in the home. At first, I looked at the overall style of the period. This led to generic results that were above the economic class of the characters. To remedy this issue, I looked into the specific stores in the area that the characters could afford. In this research I stumbled upon a series of Sear's catalogues. These catalogues showed me interior items as well as prices to evaluate whether the family would have been able to afford specific items.

Once all of the initial research was conducted, I moved into the rough design phase. This phase is a two-week process that consists of creating a series of thumbnail sketches, rough groundplans, and rough models. One of the major challenges of this phase was to not get stuck in an endless loop of sketching and revising research. For this particular design, I struggled to find a layout with audience sightlines that I found satisfactory. Therefore, I kept creating series after series of rough groundplans without any significant improvements. In order to escape this endless loop, my mentor Kerry Chipman recommended that I create a three-dimensional rough model of the most recent groundplan iteration. The rough model allowed me to better visualize



the sightlines and figure out elements in the design that were effective and ineffective. For instance, in this initial model, there was an enclosed laundry area and enclosed stairs. These elements made the space feel too tight and claustrophobic. In order to remedy this, I opted to open up the laundry area and switch to an open staircases design.

At the end of the two-week period, the design team had a formal production meeting with the director. At this meeting, the design team shared our initial designs with each other and received feedback from the director. This meeting helped the production team become aware of the direction that each other was going as well as to ensure that the overall design of the show was moving towards a cohesive end product. Andre Garner, the director, approved of the general structure and direction that the scenic design was moving towards. From this meeting, the production moved into a two-week preliminary design phase. In this phase, revisions were made to the rough designs and the designs started to become more fleshed out. During this stage, I made some minor adjustments to the structure of the set and focused on researching potential paint treatments, furniture, and set dressings. This required travelling to thrift stores, antique stores, and online shopping to find obtainable items instead of purely theoretical items. Throughout this stage, I was in constant contact with the director on order to get approval of the choices and make final purchases. At the end of this stage, I created a revised white model accompanied with paint treatment research and presented it at our second formal production meeting to receive feedback.

Afterwards, the production team moved into the final design phase. In this phase final modifications were made to the scenic design and approved by the director. A full drafting packet that detailed the construction of the set was created using Vectorworks, a computer-aided drafting program (see Appendix B). This packet was sent to Alan Perez, our technical director,

so the scene shop could start construction of the set. At this point in the process, I also created paint elevations that detailed how the set was to be painted and passed it along to Rebecca Thompson, our scenic charge. Finally, I created a color model and rendering that showed all of the scenic elements together. One of the most challenging portions of this stage was finding wallpapers that were time-period accurate and fit the characters' lives. At the final design production meeting, a wallpaper design was presented with the caveat that we were still looking for more appropriate wallpapers. Eventually, the director and I were able to find a wallpaper scheme that fit the characters' lives and juxtaposed nicely with the costume design.

From the final design phase, we moved into the final portion of the project, the construction phase. During this phase, I consistently checked in with the scenic, paint, and prop shops to ensure that everything was going smoothly, that the artistic design was being properly maintained, and to help solve any issues that were arising. During this time, I was also working closely with our lighting designer Kathryn Burke to find and install practicals (scenic lighting instruments such as lamps), pulling and buying set dressing, and helping to paint the set. Once the set and other design areas were finished, the production moved into tech weekend and dress rehearsals. At this point we examined all the design elements coming together and ensured that everything worked cohesively. Finally, from here we moved into opening night and the end of the design process. Overall, the scenic design was successful and married perfectly with the production. Working on this project has been a tremendous accomplishment. The playwright Dominique Morisseau commented that, "the set looks dope." Hearing the playwright compliment your design is the greatest achievement as a designer for it is our job to realize the playwright's vision.



Thesis

# Alexander Modlin

Scenic Designer

## Detroit '67

Scenic Designer

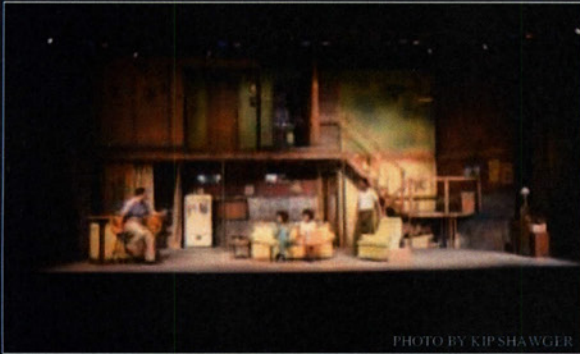


PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER

PRODUCTION PHOTO

Written by: Dominique Morisseau

Directed by: Andre Garner

Scenic Designer: Alexander Modlin

Asst. Scenic Designer: Jay Jeffcoat

Costume Designer: Chloe Thomas

Lighting Designer: Kathryn Burke

Sound Designer: Matthew Tibbs

Hair & Make-up Designer: Jordan Sible

# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer

## CONCEPT STATEMENT

Set against the backdrop of the race riots, Dominique Morisseau's *Detroit '67* focuses on an African-American family that is not only struggling to survive, but to thrive. The scenic design focuses on a realistic childhood home that provides a safe haven to survive yet is limiting in its ability to provide growth. The design entraps the characters in a stable and familiar environment full of emotional baggage that inhibits their ability to move forward with their lives.

## RESEARCH PHASE



## Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



Motown music and culture are integral to the action of the play. In the scenic design, I wanted to integrate a Motown atmosphere through décor and color palette choices.



## Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



*Detroit '67* takes place in a Detroit home in 1967, specifically 1568 Clairmount St.

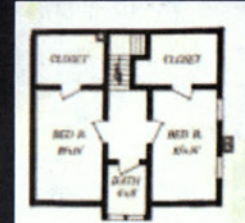
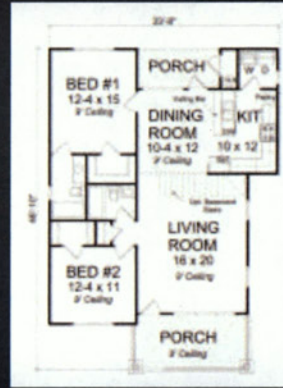
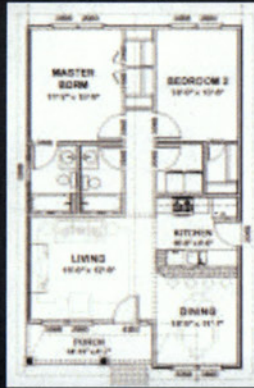
This neighborhood consists of homes that are primarily made of brick and have a rectangular layout.



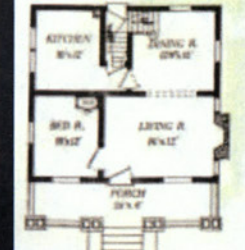


# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



Second Floor Plan—The Detroit



First Floor Plan—The Detroit

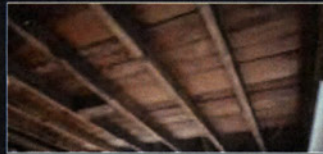
To maintain a certain degree of historical accuracy, I examined blueprints of Detroit homes. These blueprints helped establish a realistic home layout..

# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



CEMENT LEDGE



EXPOSED FLOOR JOIST



BASEMENT WINDOW

The major action of the play takes place in an unfinished basement. The unfinished elements needed to be balanced with the party atmosphere. It needed to feel unfinished while still inviting.



MICHIGAN STONE



BASEMENT STAIRS



# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



After examining the structure of Detroit homes, I began to look into interior design styles of the 1940s. The house used to belong to the characters' parents, so this range of time period helped marry elements that the parents would have had with elements that the characters brought.

# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



Magazine research provided time period accurate furniture inspiration. The price listings helped ensure that the furniture was appropriate for the characters' economic class.



# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



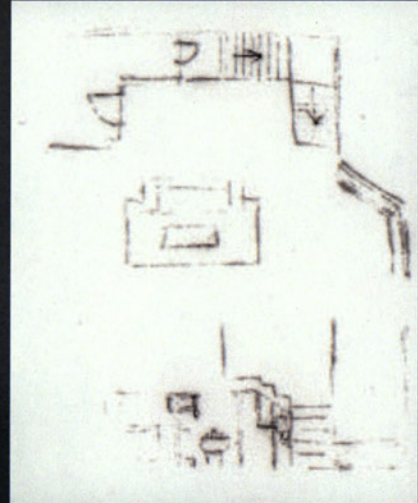
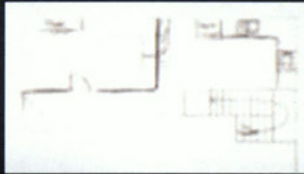
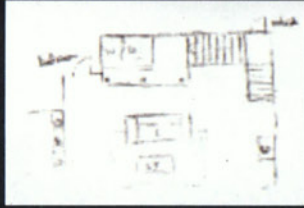
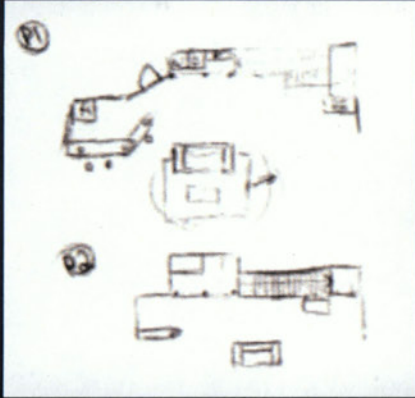
Lank introduces an 8-track player to replace Chelle's old record player. Newspaper ads showed the types of 8-tracks that were being sold in Detroit and within Lank's economic ability..



## DESIGN PHASE

## Detroit '67

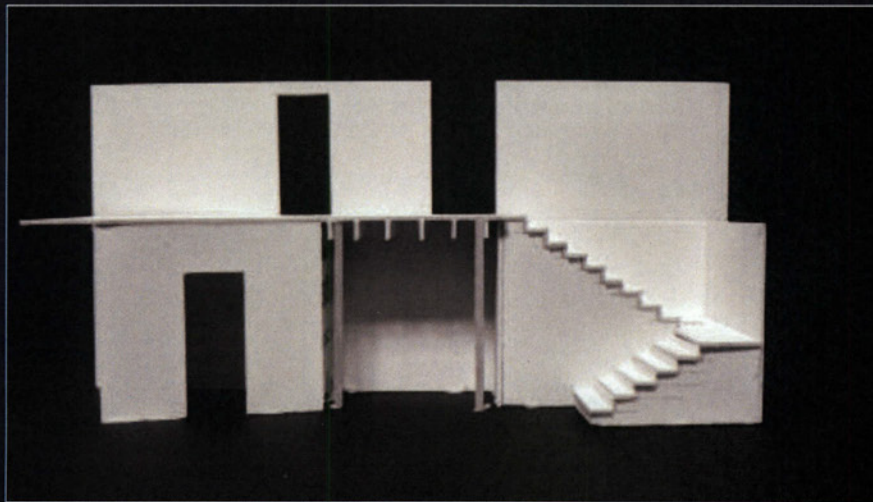
Scenic Designer



I first began by exploring possible groundplan layouts through a series of thumbnail sketches.

## Detroit '67

Scenic Designer

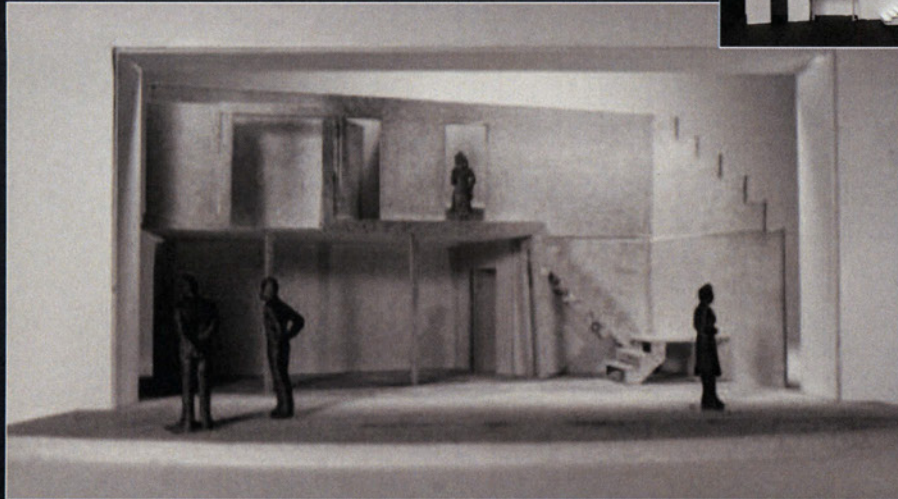
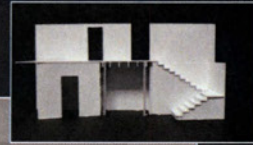


ROUGH MODEL



# Detroit '67

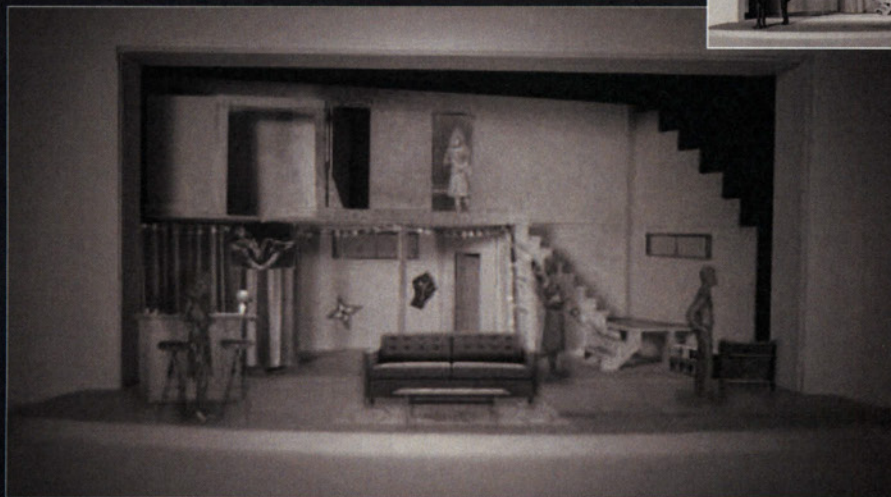
Scenic Designer



WHITE MODEL

# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



WHITE MODEL RENDERING



# Detroit '67

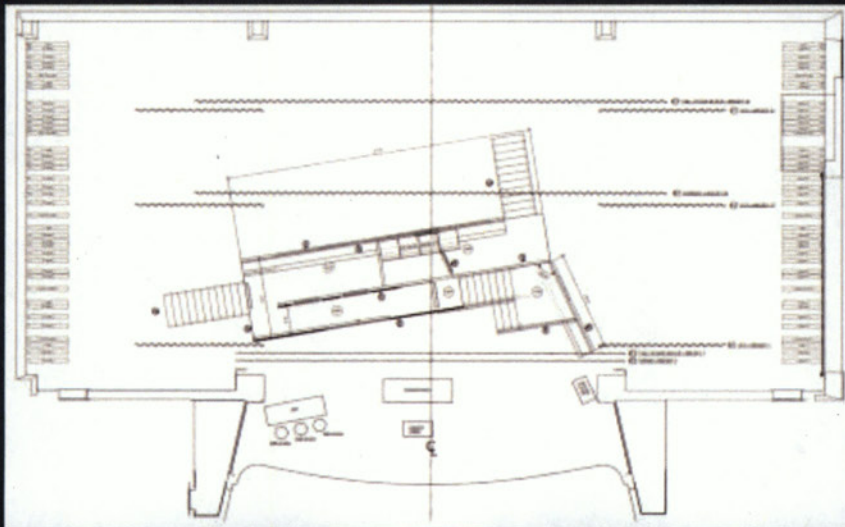
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COLOR MODEL RENDERING

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GROUND PLAN

# Detroit '67

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The color palette shifted towards a cooler palette to juxtapose the warm costume color palette.



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# FINAL PRODUCT

## Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER

PRODUCTION PHOTO



# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER  
PRODUCTION PHOTO



PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER  
PRODUCTION PHOTO

# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER  
PRODUCTION PHOTO



PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER  
PRODUCTION PHOTO

# Detroit '67

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PRODUCTION PHOTO



PRODUCTION PHOTO

# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



PRODUCTION PHOTO



PRODUCTION PHOTO



# Detroit '67

Scenic Designer



PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER

PRODUCTION PHOTO



PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER

PRODUCTION PHOTO

# Detroit '67

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PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER

PRODUCTION PHOTO



PHOTO BY KIP SHAWGER

PRODUCTION PHOTO



## Works Cited

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## Appendix A

DETROIT '67					
Scene Location & Character Entrances/Exits Breakdown					
	Page	Character	Enter	Exit	Location (To/From) Notes & Script Directions
ACT I Scene 01	7	Chelle			Onstage
	8	Bunny	X		Upstairs
	12	Lank	X		Upstairs Carrying Box
	13	Sly	X		Upstairs Carrying Box; Initially Enters House, Turns Off Truck, Re-Enters
	14	Lank/Sly		X	Upstairs Grabbing 8-Track
	14	Lank/Sly	X		Upstairs Bringing Down 8-track
	20	Bunny		X	Home
	21	Sly		X	Home
	22	Chelle		X	Liquor Store Grabs Keys From Upstairs Counter
ACT I Scene 02	23	Sly/Lank/Caroline	X		Outside Sneaks in Caroline
	25	Chelle	X		Bedroom Investigates Noise
	28	Sly		X	Upstairs Bathroom Grabbing Ointment
	29	Sly	X		Upstairs Bathroom Returning with Med Supplies
	29	Sly		X	Home
	30	Lank		X	Sly's Home Taking Sly Home
	30	Chelle		X	Bedroom Switches Off Lights
ACT I Scene 03	31	Caroline			Onstage
	31	Lank	X		Kitchen Brings Caroline Breakfast
	33	Caroline		X	Washroom Uses Toilet in Washroom
	33	Chelle	X		Bank
	34	Caroline	X		Washroom Cleaned-Up
	36	Caroline		X	Upstairs To Right, Down the Hall; Getting Clothes From Chelle
	36	Chelle		X	Upstairs Bringing Clothes to Caroline
	37	Lank		X	Kitchen Carrying Off Food
ACT I Scene 04	38	Chelle			Onstage Filling Bowls of Nuts and Setting Napkins
	38	Lank			Onstage Stacking Songs by 8-Track
	38	Bunny			Onstage Rocking to Music on Stool
	38	Caroline			Onstage Kitchen Mixing Punch
	39	Sly	X		Liquor Store Carrying Bag of Liquor
	41	Caroline	X		Kitchen Carrying Punch
	42	Caroline		X	Kitchen Refills Chips
	43	Caroline	X		Kitchen Carrying Chips
	45	Caroline/Bunny		X	Kitchen Mix Chip Dip
	45	Chelle		X	Upstairs Change Chip Bowls; Write-Out Prices; Grabbing More Cups
ACT I Scene 05	47	Chelle			Onstage Counting Money
	47	Caroline	X		Washroom Drying Hair
	48	Chelle		X	Store Buying Party Supplies
	48	Lank	X		Upstairs Coming to Check Fuses
	53	Chelle	X		Store Wondering if Ice is in Freezer
	54	Caroline		X	Garage Getting Ice/Leaving Awkward Situation
ACT I Scene 06	54	Chelle		X	Upstairs
	55	Caroline			Onstage Sleeping on Couch
	55	Lank	X		Upstairs Looking for Flashlight
	55	Chelle	X		Bedroom? Enters in Robe; Enquiring About Noise
	57	Lank		X	Sheepings Bar Grabs Bat on Way Out
ACT II Scene 01	59	Chelle			Onstage Hanging Clothes/Tending Laundry
	59	Bunny	X		Home Checking on Chelle
	60	Caroline			Upstairs Shower In Upstairs Shower



## Appendix B

